The Dispossession of Character

OMRI MOSES, *Out of Character: Modernism, Vitalism, Psychic Life* Stanford: Stanford UP, 2014, pp. 296, cloth, $65.00.

Characterizations of modernism have been changing dramatically over the past decades, but it is only recently that critics have started diagnosing how modernist writers themselves can change our contemporary understanding of what character is—or can potentially become. In a brilliant book that sails against the critical current with the speed and vitality of a Deleuzian line of flight, Omri Moses's *Out of Character: Modernism, Vitalism, Psychic life* urges readers to "rethink what it means to have a character, or, in the literary case, what it means to be one" (4). He convincingly argues that there is a psychological and ethical potential at the heart of modernism that has so far been untapped yet is readily available in the vitalist philosophies that directly inform early modernist writers such as Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and T. S. Eliot. In the process, Moses offers an original and groundbreaking diagnostic of the psychic life of modernism that opens up the boundaries of subjectivity to its affective, relational, and ethical outside—thereby making the understanding of character new.

Moses reconfigures both literary and human characters as intersubjective, situational, and traversed by affective fluxes that open up the possibility of becoming other in a world defined by radical change and transformation. He traces this flexible view of subjectivity back to philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Darwin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and, especially, William James and Henri Bergson, vitalist philosophers who "have an investment in affective transmission that blurs boundaries between self and other" (65). One of the most far-reaching implications of this book is that it goes beyond twentieth-century formalist readings that framed modernist aesthetics within an autonomous and self-referential conception of art in order to foreground psychological and ethical principles about human relations that are relevant for our understanding of an evolving psychic life in the twenty-first century. As Moses puts it: "Till now modernism has often been saddled with a reputation for impersonal writing, formalism, and a commitment to ruthless purification of experience. I would argue instead that we might see it as offering new ways of thinking about relationality and community life" (27).

Moses's critical shift from a formalist to a psychological rendering of modernism is predicated on an underlying theoretical move that sets out to decenter dominant accounts of subject formation. Thus, in chapter 1, "Personhood beyond Personality," Moses sails past the Scylla of the poststructuralist decentering of the linguistic subject and the Charybdis of psychoanalytical accounts of ego formation in order to propose a "vitalist-inspired conception of character" (4) that is as embodied in biology as it is open to cultural influences. The chapter's emphasis on "affective life" (60), "psychological presence" (59), and "biological processes" (65) emerges from a close engagement with vitalist texts such as William James's *The Principles of Psychology* and Bergson's *Matter and Memory*, but this choice is equally informed by recent theoretical developments, such as new materialism and affect theory. Overall, this

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first chapter deftly roots subjectivity back in intersubjective, social, and immanent relations congruent with a "modernist allegiance to a fully material account of psychic life" (25); it also gives ethical substance to a poststructuralist tendency that "aggrandizes the indeterminate, the free-flowing, and the decentered in questions of human action" (24).

Moses is critical of a purely linguistic conception of the subject, but he is careful not to fall back on an essentialist view of character. In fact, vitalist philosophers promote an ontology of becoming rather than of being, a psychology of continuity rather than of sameness. And yet, since Moses's reading of Bergson (the main theoretical influence in this book) is informed by Gilles Deleuze (the philosopher who single-handedly generated new interest in Bergson in recent years), at times one wonders: can this antihumanist conception of character understood "as a process, not a substance" (6) be distinguished neatly from the so-called poststructuralist critique of the subject? Deleuze, for one, was not antagonistic to other French theorists of Nietzschean inspiration, and affect theory bears many traces of prior decenterings. In any case, if fluid ontological continuities between vitalism and poststructuralism emerge from this study, they are not symptomatic of a theoretical weakness. On the contrary, reframed in a broader genealogy, Moses's insights into "psychic life" can be seen as a contribution to answering the poststructuralist question "who comes after the subject?" (Cadava, Connor, and Nancy).

Moses's theoretical *différend* is more sharply delineated with respect to psychoanalysis, the theory of subjectivity that he argues—correctly, I think—"had a large hand in obscuring vitalist ideas and its rich conceptual legacy" (23). *Out of Character* is thus anti-Oedipal in theoretical inspiration, but one of the many virtues of Moses's approach is that he refrains from simply applying a theory (past or contemporary) to modernist texts. Rather, in true genealogical fashion, he seeks to infer his anti-Oedipal insights from his three literary case studies themselves, as he patiently traces neglected influences, continuities, and elective affinities between vitalist psychologists and modernist writers, weaving intricate connections between Henry James and William James (chapter 2), Stein and Charles Darwin (chapter 3), Eliot and Bergson (chapter 4). Vitalist psychology in this book is thus not mapped onto literature; rather, literary texts are used to reflect on new principles of psychology.

Chapter 2 offers illuminating diagnostic readings of Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and especially, *The Golden Bowl*, novels that reveal relational characters whose desires are not framed within triangular structures or "inhibited by the precedents of the past" (105). Rather, characters like Lambert Strether, Kate Croy, and Maggie Verver are shown to be constantly in flux, part of an ever-shifting "web of connections" (73) that leads them to be strikingly adaptable, affectively attuned to others, and open to improvising future-oriented actions and reactions triggered by specific social situations that offer them the possibility to "transform" and "reinvent" themselves (102). It is on the basis of such future-oriented analyses of modernist fictional characters that Moses suggests (again rightly, in my view) that "psychoanalysis is heir to a nineteenth-century view of character as a preserving structure and, mutatis mutandis, continues to insist on a sedimented, repetitive personality shaped by certain formative events in personal life" (24).

Chapter 3 reframes Stein's experimental fascination with linguistic repetition beyond the limits of the text in order to account for the way habits and routines generate behavioral repetitions with a difference. Such repetitions, Moses argues, do not freeze characters in fixed structures but open up what he calls "the syntax of a person" (124) to a process of biological and cultural becoming. Based on a selective reading of Stein's early work focused especially

on the short story "Melanctha" (collected in *Three Lives*), this chapter opens up an interdisciplinary line of investigation that casts new light on Stein's experimental techniques more generally. Central to this chapter is Moses's account of the underlying continuities between Stein's use of serial narrative technique and Darwin's evolutionary theory of emotions. This interdisciplinary move allows Moses to break down narrow oppositions between "formal experiments" and characters' "psychological development" (119). More generally, it challenges structural oppositions between nature and culture in a way "that contests both biological essentialism and social constructionism" (119). Moses shows that Stein, a student of Darwin and William James, retained the key lesson that "biology is not destiny" but can be changed by recursive cultural habits. If these habits often operate unconsciously, Moses has no trouble showing that this unconscious is far from being Freudian but opens the door for a "habitual unconscious" (132) that operates on the basis of "automatic," "reflex reactions" (128). While at times this chapter feels a bit narrow in hermeneutical scope, it is nonetheless broad in its theoretical ramifications. In particular, it revitalizes a much-neglected psycho-physiological conception of the mimetic unconscious that renders the subject receptive to "imitative or 'sympathetic' instincts" (126), is rooted in "automatic or unthinking responses" (129), and, above all, fosters "plasticity in the face of changing circumstances" (124).

Moses's consistent emphasis on a type of character that is "plastic," "malleable," and "adaptable" informs his entire account of the psychic life of modernism and will certainly have a strong impact. Given the importance of this insight, a few supplementary diagnostic qualifications are nonetheless in order. I will limit myself to three points. First, Moses derives his conception of "plasticity" from James's *The Principles of Psychology*, a text he reads from the perspective of a vitalist ontology of becoming explicitly inspired by Bergson, and implicitly by Deleuze. This genealogy opens up a life-affirming view of transformative possibilities that is as important as it is optimistic; yet it is equally important to recall that James complicates a vitalist celebration of the fluidity of character with the pragmatic lesson that plasticity cuts both ways and is responsible for both adaptive and rigid behavior. "For most of us," writes James in his chapter "Habit" in the abridged version of *Principles*, "by the age of thirty, the character has set like plaster, and will never soften again" (11). Second, a more detailed genealogy of plasticity framed by larger ethical concerns would benefit from aligning the moderns with the ancients on this particular point. Far from being a modernist invention, the plasticity of human character can be traced all the way back to the birth of ethical theory itself. In book 2 of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates reminds his listeners that from youth onward, character is "molded [most notably by fictions] and takes the impression that one wishes to stamp upon it" (2.377b), a mimetic lesson that, while Moses does not mention it, is quite literally inscribed in the etymology of "character" itself (from Greek, *kharassein*, to engrave, to stamp). Third, recent discoveries in the neurosciences have now empirically confirmed that the human brain remains, for better and for worse, plastic throughout one's life due to the synapses' so-called neuroplasticity. This new scientific discovery is reminiscent of the old philosophical lesson that where lies the potential for revolutionary transformations also lurks the danger of docile adaptations. Such theoretical supplements show that there are two sides to plasticity, one oriented toward vitality, the other toward ossification. They also confirm that this is, indeed, a book that looks back to modern—and, implicitly, ancient—principles in order to better see what lies ahead.

Finally, while we can readily agree that Henry James and, perhaps less obviously but not less fundamentally, Stein support vitalist psychology, Moses's investment in "repsychologizing character" (57) appears more problematic when it comes to Eliot. Eliot's account of "impersonality" in "Tradition and Individual Talent" is, in fact, an explicit attempt to cleanse from poetry the expression of the poet's personal emotions and is thus far removed from psychology. And yet, in a counterintuitive move, Moses provocatively argues that within the highly dramatic scenarios of poems such as "Convictions," "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and "Portrait of a Lady," impersonality is not at all inimical to affective relations. On the contrary, listening carefully to the tonality of voice that informs these poems, Moses shows that impersonality turns out to be the necessary condition for "intellectual and affective adjustments to others" (155). This formal insight leads him to make a larger ethical point, namely that "Eliot develops his notorious concept of impersonality not solely as an aesthetic program but also as an imaginative ideal for restructuring social interactions" (163).

It should be clear from what has been said so far that the second major stake for Moses consists in redefining ethics on the basis of a relational conception of subjectivity that ties the other—via emotions, bodily reflexes, and voices—to the psychic life of others. His Janus-faced psychological/ethical investments are vitally connected from the beginning of his book and serve as a driving telos of an argument that stretches beyond the text in order to consider how the "modernist concern with literary character is dominated by the question of how to think about life" (3). The ethical picture that progressively emerges from his case studies counters the ancient idea, at least since Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, that "consistency" of character or the existence of "an antecendent personality" (32) is a precondition for virtue. Instead, Moses proposes a view of ethical life defined by relationality, flexibility, and open-ended adaptability to changing social conditions. "The chief worth of such open-endedness," argues Moses, is that it allows "people to suspend interests long enough to help them define new provisional communities appropriate to them" (114). Moses's emphasis on community based on a subject that is always already singular-plural is in tune with contemporary philosophers of poststructuralist orientation such as Jean-Luc Nancy, whom he quotes, but given this book's phenomenological emphasis on self-other relations with ethical implications, Emmanuel Levinas is surprisingly missing. An engagement with Levinas's ethical thought would have given philosophical substance to Moses's ethical thesis. It also would have provided a genealogical supplement to the vitalist tradition he taps into, thereby confirming the hypothesis that, in matters concerning character, boundaries (including philosophical boundaries) are porous and fluid. Still, Moses's emphasis on community, relationality, and a type of other that is emotionally tied to the self resonates with the new ethical turn in literary studies and will certainly appeal to a variety of modernist scholars.

I found *Out of Character* to be one of the most innovative and inspiring books on modernism I have read in a long time. It is also a book that confirms Nietzsche's untimely insight that "psychology is once again the road to the fundamental problems" (54). But precisely this Nietzschean attention to psychology could, at times, have led to more nuanced ethical considerations. Toward the end of the book, as Moses briefly touches on Windham Lewis and D. H. Lawrence before shifting his discussion from "the increasingly mass-mediated context of modern life in the early twentieth century to the digital landscape of the present" (206), the ethical suspicion I felt at the beginning returned—with a vengeance. Given Moses's important reminder that "we act before we think" (40)—that we, not unlike modernist characters, are chameleon-like creatures defined by a striking tendency toward "identification"

(34), "plasticity" (97), "adaptation" (128), "susceptibility to mimicking others" (165), and other mimetic faculties rooted in biology—we might wonder: is there not also a dangerous ethical vulnerability that emerges directly out of this plastic conception of character? After all, one of the most incisive diagnostic lessons Nietzschean modernists taught is that these malleable dispositions were effectively exploited for authoritarian, life-negating, and unspeakable purposes, which, historically, culminated in the horror of the 1930s and 1940s but, in our digitized cultures, we are far from having overcome. Moses is aware of this danger, but the "vital signs" (199) that punctuate this study lead him away from a less optimistic, perhaps more tragic, but, in my view, equally vital insight into the obscure ethical side of all kinds of mimetic and unconscious adaptations.

Thus, as Moses draws his study to an end with a far-reaching afterword that encourages "vitalist-inspired media theorists" (206) to consider the potential for future transformations of character in the digital age, let us not forget the old pragmatic lesson he mentions toward the beginning of the book: namely, that "as social creatures human beings are subject to pernicious influence or pressure from figures who convey authority to them, even when this authority is nominal" (39). Moses derives this ethical insight from well-known post–World War II sociopsychological experiments carried out within the confines of a lab. Less known is that it is also a diagnostic lesson that emerges directly out of Nietzschean modernist authors that, in their fictions, anticipated historical horrors yet to come. Such precursors look back to ethical shadows of the past to better see what lies ahead; they also warn that the future-oriented, mediatized, and digitized subject is likely to be dispossessed of a character that—as Omri Moses brilliantly demonstrates—has never been one.

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